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# A Critical Analysis of Practices of Collecting Fashionable Dress

Amy de la Haye

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## Abstract

This article analyzes various practices of collecting fashionable dress. The first section comprises a critical analysis of terminologies and theories that explore definitions of a collected object, a collection and some specificities of collecting fashionable dress. There follows a series of themes arranged in a biographical sequence of a collector's lifetime and that of a collection. These include explorations of when in a person's life they collect fashion and why; classifications and hierarchies of collectors and collected objects; collecting as an extension of the self; gendered debates; the spaces of collecting; shifted and dispersed collections; whether a collection can be completed in a lifetime; and bequests and legacy. The methodology draws



upon evidence taken from interviews, memoirs, museum publications and auction catalogs, which are tested against the ideas of cultural critics and collections scholars. The emphasis is upon private collectors.

**KEYWORDS:** accretion, collect/or/ion, classification, biography, legacy

## Introduction

In 1958 the pioneer costume (the contemporaneous term for fashion, dress and sometimes fancy dress too) curator Anne Buck wrote in the *Handbook for Museum Curators: Costume* (1958), published by The Museums Association, that the practice of collecting costume was not only a recent development but also a limited field:

The beauty of dress, always ephemeral, is so closely connected with the living, moving body which wore it and gave it final expression, that a dress surviving, uninhabited, may appear as an elaborate piece of fabric, an accidental repository of the textile arts, but little more. (Buck 1958, 3)

Sixty years on, there exists a vibrant and expanding international market for collecting fashionable dress amongst private individuals, public institutions, private institutions and, what are defined here as, commercial collectors.

It has been estimated that at least one-third of people in affluent nations collected something (Belk 1995, 83). These practices and communities are supported by scores of specialist clubs and societies, journals, the Internet and popular television and radio programs. The academic study of collecting has, since the 1970s, emerged as a distinctive discipline which has—unlike fashion studies—drawn the attention of those studying museology; art, design and sociocultural history; material culture; biography and autobiography; sociology; anthropology; consumer behavior; and psychiatry and psychology. Media specific collections studies, along with *The Journal of the History of Collections* (est. 1989) invariably privilege the fine and decorative arts and anthropology. Published examinations of the evolution of fashion collections (Clark and de la Haye 2014; Eicher 2010; Riegels Melchoir and Svensson 2010; Taylor 2004) are relatively recent and foreground the public museum.<sup>1</sup>

Here, emphasis is placed upon private collectors and, in keeping with this author's research experience, many of the examples are British. The subject is fashionable dress and henceforth the terms fashion and dress are used interchangeably. The period in focus is from the mid-nineteenth century onward, which has seen the development of the modern fash-

ion industry and mass production technologies, and the evolution of the public museum—final home to scores of private collections. Drawing upon fashion, museology, cultural and collections studies, along with auction catalogs, memoirs and interviews, this article critically evaluates various practices of collecting fashion and ponders whether these are distinctive.

The first section comprises a critical analysis of terminologies, ideas and scholastic theories that explore definitions of a collector, a collected object and what constitutes a collection. These are tested against evidence gleaned from site visits and interviews with private fashion collectors. There follows a series of themes arranged in the biographical sequence of a collector's lifetime and that of a collection. This explores at what point in their lives and why people collect fashion. It goes on to explore classifications and hierarchies of collectors and fashion objects, collecting as an extension of the self and gendered debates. It concludes with an examination of dress as an awkward media to collect; the spaces of collecting; shifted and dispersed collections; whether a collection can be completed in a lifetime; and bequests and legacy.

### Terminologies and Interpretations: Tested and Contested

Perhaps the real point is that a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it as such. (Pearce 1994, 158)

Dictionary definitions of a collector state simply that it is a person who collects specific things as a hobby or a job. However, as will be demonstrated, perceptions of the nuances of a collector's skills, motivations and personality traits are critical and complex. When applied to fashionable dress they are fascinating and challenging. The verb to collect derives from the Latin word *colligere*, which means to select, gather and assemble. Defined thus, it is a term that might seem eminently suited to describe the processes of acquiring fashionable dress, which is often obtained in the form of single garments and accessories, combined with other newly acquired or existing items of dress, to form an ensemble for daily use or special occasion wear. However, as will be discussed, there exists a strong school of thought that an object can only be defined as collected when it no longer serves its original function.

CosProp (est. 1965), a London-based firm belonging to John Bright, specializes in the hire of fashionable dress that is original, reconstructed or comprises made costumes for stage, television and film productions. Since the 1960s Bright has acquired a large quantity of mostly fashionable dress dating from the eighteenth century onward for research purposes. This is carefully stored in a large room that he calls "the museum" and Elizabeth Owen, a professional staff member, cares for and makes it accessible to the designers they work with. Bright states that "I freely admit I collect certain

things. I know the clothes are a collection but I don't see them that way. I suppose it's because I think of them being part of the process of designing and regenerating things." He then reflected, "We don't collect clothes because we need them" (interview, January 22, 2016).

The cultural critic Jean Baudrillard states that every object serves two functions, to be put to use and to be possessed, and that these stand in inverse relation to each other:

At one extreme, the strictly practical object acquires a social status: this is the case with the machine. At the opposite extreme, the pure object, devoid of any function or completely abstracted from its use, takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection. (Baudrillard 1994)

The thesis of business academic Russell W. Belk, author of *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, orbits around his conviction that "... collecting is consumption writ large. It is a perpetual pursuit of inessential luxury goods" (Belk 1995, 83, 1) and is referenced extensively. Belk is emphatic (it is printed in bold font) that "... collecting is the process of actively, selectively and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (1995, 67). If we subscribe to this idea, it would be argued that it is only possible to collect fashionable dress when it is no longer worn. However, not all academics or collectors do so.

Historian Christine M. Guth has studied the collecting practices of the American philanthropist, collector and arts patron Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924). Following the death of their child, Isabella and her husband traveled to Europe. In Paris she ordered haute-couture gowns at the salon of Charles Frederick Worth. Guth pinpoints this event as the trigger for future and lifelong collecting practices. Indeed, she is emphatic that, for Isabella, "... dressing was inseparable from collecting" (Guth 2015, 124). More recently, from 1996 to 2006, Kyoichi Tsuzuki photographed and interviewed over 100 young Japanese people who had trimmed down all living costs in order to buy fashionable dress by their favorite designers. Whilst they mostly wore these items, several describe themselves as collectors, as does Tsuzuki.

As owner of the shop VintageParade in Sheffield (UK), Jojo Elgarice is ideally placed to acquire items for his personal collection. He advised that:

Unlike many clothing collectors I don't have a particular theme to what I collect. My collection consists of early British Victorian & Edwardian clothing, 1940s–1980s waxed cotton motorcycle jackets, outdoors and hiking/climbing clothing, 1980s & '90s Stone Island & CP company jackets, British & French Workwear & some Unusual Military Clothing.

Inverting theories that objects only becoming collectible when they no longer serve their original use value, Elgarice wears the items he defines as collected. Furthermore, he regards doing so as a meaningful act, one that extends the biography of the collected garment and entwines it with his own life;

I wear 90% of my Collection so it becomes a bit more than something in a case or on a wall as each piece holds great memories and tells stories not just from the previous owner(s) but for me also. (Email, August 18, 2017)

Whilst it is generally accepted that collecting forms a strategic and selective process, as will be argued here, not all collections of fashionable dress were thus formed. In 1946 Nancy, Lady Bagot (1920–2014), and her husband Caryl Ernest, 6th Baron Bagot (1877–1961), moved into his ancestral home, Blithfield House in Staffordshire, UK, where they discovered a trunk storing fashionable and ceremonial dress dating from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. Later in her life Lady Bagot reflected that:

The Bagot Collection was formed quite by chance ... A large house like Blithfield has plenty of space for hoarding things, so, when someone, who is a hoarder by nature, is fortunate enough to live in a large house, after a period of time you find you have a “collection.” (Bradbury 1983, 8)

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines hoarding as a “stock or store ... an amassed store of facts etc. ... accumulate more than one’s current requirements ...” (COED 1991, 560). Belk believes that hoarders, unlike collectors, lack “selective acquisitiveness” and do not follow the principle of “no two alike” (Belk 1995, 67). For Lady Bagot the discovered garments became a collection when she defined it as such. But, this does not mean that she was a collector.

For Belk, “Someone who possesses a collection is not necessarily a collector unless they continue to acquire additional things for the collection” (1995, 66). Poet, critic and author Susan Stewart believes that “... the collection must be acquired in a serial manner. This seriality provides a means for defining or classifying the collection and the collector’s life history, and it also permits a systematic substitution of purchase for labor” (Stewart [1993] 2003, 66). In this context, seriality means the sequential and strategic acquisition of objects, one considered in relation to another. Blithfield House was opened to the public in 1956 and the dress was displayed and interpreted in the context of genealogy. The house was closed in 1977 due to the prohibitive cost of upkeep. Lady Bagot subsequently donated the family dress, along with a selection of her own fashion clothing (i.e. she added to it), as “The Bagot Collection” to the nearby City Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, UK.



Once an individual defines the dress in their possession as a collection, it can generate a sense of responsibility for its care, access and future as a collection. Elgarice reflects that “I do often think about the future of it and some of it should be kept together i.e. military jackets belonging to the same officer/soldier. Maybe I should photograph it all and/or display it all someday ....” Hamish Bowles, international editor at large for *Vogue*, is a major private collector of top-level, international, fashion. He has collected since childhood and now owns some 3000 fashion items dating from the 1850s to the present day. He observes that “A collection starts out as an accumulation of things you are intrigued by, and suddenly becomes the collection, which needs to be properly managed” (Rytter 2013, 6A). He plans to establish a not-for-profit archive for student research purposes.

Jacki Cook and Jon Hale own a collection comprising several thousands of items of everyday, primarily British, fashionable dress designed for men, women and children, dating from the early nineteenth century to the 1980s. From 1984 until 2014 the couple ran a large and well-known vintage clothing shop, The Emporium, in Greenwich (London, UK), during which time they safeguarded items that were overtly fashionable (but rarely designer-labeled), of average sizes and that were either unworn or in good condition. In recent years they have classified the collected and collected strategically to fill perceived gaps. Fashion houses, including Prada, make appointments to view their collection for inspiration and they have lent items to be worn for film. They feel strongly that the collection should remain intact—that the sum is greater than the individual components—and would ideally like it to form a student resource.

In common with other collected objects, fashionable dress can be found or acquired as a gift; can be obtained by swapping; can be purchased from dealers, at auction, markets, antique shops and jumble sales and, more recently, via e-commerce. As Douglas and Elizabeth Rigby, authors of an immensely popular 1940s book on collecting, recognize:

In talking of collecting values there is a temptation to think chiefly in terms of high or low figure; what will such and such an item bring on the open market? Yet the monetary value of collecting is not at all the heart of consideration for most collectors. (Rigby and Rigby 1944, 355)

This is certainly the case with fashionable dress that rarely has intrinsic monetary worth, and is often valued for the deeply personal meanings it can hold. Langley Moore divided fashion collectors into two categories, the virtuosi and the historians. “The former desires excellence—what were often regarded as ‘museum pieces’” whilst the historian seeks what is representative and typical irrespective of rarity and beauty (Langley Moore [1951] 1967, 10).

Many collections scholars and collectors distinguish and articulate hierarchies amongst collectors by the use of adjectives such as “real,”

“true,” “genuine,” “good,” “bad” and “amateur.” Most highly revered is the connoisseur. Belk writes that:

Since the Enlightenment, being a connoisseur has meant specialized knowledge about an area of collecting and the corresponding abilities to classify collectibles according to acceptable taxonomies, to possess and exercise taste and judgement, and to assess authenticity and value. In other words, the amateur collector is a passionate subjective consumer, while the connoisseur is a rational objective expert. (Belk 1995, 45)

Historically, the noun connoisseur was reserved primarily to describe what were considered the rational and strategic (sometimes referred to as self-gifting) practices of men, whereas women were often portrayed as indiscriminate consumers of bibelots.

Because fashion is inherently ephemeral it can be dismissed as lacking in lasting value, financial and otherwise. In the concluding statements of his 2008 publication, Kyoichi Tsuzuki rued that whilst the bibliophile or record collector generally commanded respect, or acceptance at least, some of the collectors he had worked with had encountered derogatory reactions because their chosen medium was fashion. He is bemused that “Only the objects of their passion differ, not the depth or intensity. Can such a hierarchy really exist in the world of collecting?” (Tsuzuki 2008, n.p.). Susan Stewart identifies collections of “ephemera proper,” which she defines as “disposable items,” offering as examples “beer cans” and “cast-off clothing” (Stewart [1984] 2003, 166). She states that “Such collections might seem to be anti-collections in their denial of the values of the antique and the classic as transcendent forms” ([1984] 2003, 167). This is an interesting idea and has resonance with some of the fashion collections discussed here.

A number of core texts on collecting were published in the twentieth or early twenty-first centuries and do not take into account more recent acceptance that whilst physiologically sex is biologically determined, gender is a social construct. Much of the language used and ideas expressed, that both predate and have informed collecting studies, are informed by patriarchal attitudes and some are overtly sexist. Notions of male and female gendered practices of collecting infuse many texts—from analysis of the type of objects collected, to how and why they are acquired and displayed, by whom and when. Debates about gender, classifications and hierarchies with relation to collecting fashionable dress are explored in the following.

Much of the terminology commonly used to describe the motivating qualities of a collector—nouns that include longing, desire, passion, fantasy, possession and obsession—are also employed to elucidate psycho-sexual impulses. Susan Stewart writes that “The boundary between collection and fetishism is mediated by classification and display in tension with accumulation and secrecy” ([1984] 2003, 163). This article does not explore objects collected from this perspective. However, it does reference the work

of the philosopher and cultural critic Jean Baudrillard, who drew upon Marx's fetishization of objects in terms of their exchange value within capitalist societies and Freud's interpretation of desired objects as substitutes for sexual relationships. His work is sexist, but it provides fascinating critique on collecting. Similar terms are also employed to describe practices of consumption in societies where much expenditure is propelled by desire, rather than need. They are also words often selected to describe our relationship with the clothes we wear and collect.

In recent years fashion designers, fashion houses and luxury brands have, in increasing numbers, collected their own label products from previous seasons' collections, in order to safeguard, exhibit and market their "heritage," as well as provide inspiration to in-house designers. In order to distinguish these individuals and companies, including CosProp, they are defined here as commercial collectors. Strategically selected and once acquired, the fashion items are generally not worn again (in accordance with International Council of Museum guidelines) and serve new use functions.

For Roger K. Burton, the huge group of subcultural and street fashion that he has collected since the 1960s forms the basis of his business, The Contemporary Wardrobe Collection (est. 1979, London, UK). He had collected badges as a child and in his teenage years became fascinated by youth culture, music and film. It was originally the desire to wear that ignited his interest in period fashion clothing. Unable to resist interesting items even if they did not fit him, he turned his interest into a business and opened a shop in 1969 selling 1930s and 1940s fashions in Leicester (UK). He states that 'I have always worn stuff I collected if I could' (interview, April 6, 2016).

The business expanded and he moved to London, but "When punk came along that was the end of vintage" (interview January 11, 2018). He started to design and supply costume for film. A former mod himself, he provided the dress for *Quadrophenia* (1979) which provided an opportunity to sell much of his old stock. Once the filming was complete, he established The Contemporary Wardrobe to store his evolving collection of streetstyle clothing for film, photo shoots and research for fashion and film designers. Housed in an eighteenth-century building that was originally a horse hospital in Bloomsbury, he cannot imagine having to move the collection, would like it to remain intact. Unusually for a private collector, he has published an extensively illustrated book on his collection called *Rebel Threads* (Burton 2017).

These examples suggest that fashionable dress is distinctive from many other collected media, in so far as it is not always selected and strategically acquired to form part of an evolving collection. Rather, it tends to be accumulated by individuals who, at some point in their lives, view their own clothes or those belonging to and/or worn by others with "new eyes"—as a collection. This is certainly the case with what some museum curators describe as "wardrobe collections" of the dress worn by one person over a period of time, but which was arguably not collected. The term accre-



tion is defined by the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* as, "... growth by organic enlargement. The growth of separate things into one" (COED 1991, 9). It is descriptive of the formation of many collections of fashionable dress.

Whilst most collectors and collections studies focus upon tangible objects, as the Rigbys recognized:

There remains, however, the entirely distinct class of nonmaterial. The very act of gathering and remembering facts, a practice which might be called universal, is a kind of collecting, and all true collectors indulge in it as a byway to their main occupation. The stories, the legends, the bits of information concerning the objects in a collection—all these are, in a sense, added to the store itself by any amateur or connoisseur. (Rigby and Rigby 1944, 316)

In a similar vein, collections scholar Philipp Blom believes that "Imaginary collections are as important as real ones: both place on their stage memories as contained in objects: both seek to lock out death by building fortresses of remembrances and permanence" (Blom 2003, 184). This text focuses upon the biographies of collectors and collections of material (as opposed to immaterial) fashion garments, accessories and trimmings.

AO14  


### Collecting Fashion: When is the Time?

If one is born with the sort of acquisitiveness collectors are plagued with, to have two of anything is to set up a mysterious kind of compulsion to multiply. (Langley Moore 1955, 10)

In his study of art collectors, the auctioneer and collector Maurice Rheims wrote that "An inherited passion for collecting explains the existence of whole families of collectors ..." (Rheims 1959/1961, 22). Doris Langley Moore (1902–1989) was an influential fashion collector, curator, stage designer, writer and Byron scholar, whose private collection of historical fashionable dress formed the basis of Eridge Castle Museum of Costume (UK, 1955–1957) and The Museum of Costume (now Bath Fashion Museum, UK, est. 1963). She was reflective about her lifelong collecting practices, described herself as "The Collector" and referenced the "collector's blood" that ran through her veins (Langley Moore 1955, 9). Likewise, Jacki Cook states about her collecting instincts "It is in the blood." She traces her interest in collecting dress to early childhood, recalling happy days accompanying her grandfather, a rag-and-bone man, on his horse and cart in Deptford (East London, UK) and being allowed to select items to keep. She always chose dress (interview July 28, 2017).

AO15  




Childhood experiences and/or remembered life events are the reason most people attribute to their collecting practices. For Baudrillard, the practices of collecting are entwined with sexual development. He writes that, “For the child, collecting represents the most rudimentary control over the outer world: by laying things out, grouping them, handling them” (Baudrillard 1994, 9). He notes that the most active phase of collecting seems to be between ages seven and 12 years and then disappears with the onset of puberty (1994, 9).

As a young boy Charles Stewart (1915–2001) adored dressing-up in historical and historically styled garments, and in his teenage years developed a fascination with how historical dress was presented in novels and films. He went on to study at art school and became a professional illustrator. In order to research historical styles of fashionable dress he visited the Victoria & Albert Museum where he marveled at the garments exhibited. It was not until a friend took him to London’s Caledonian Road Market that he realized he might acquire “... such treasures for myself” (Stewart 1980, \*\*). His first purchases comprised a Victorian skirt and an eighteenth-century waistcoat that had been remade into a workbag. From the 1930s he became a collector of historical fashion (men’s and women’s wear) and of Greek and Turkish national dress.

Hamish Bowles started to collect fashionable dress from the age of six years. On shopping trips with his mother he bought accessories including Victorian purses at jumble sales, antique and junk shops. He purchased his first haute-couture garment when he was 11 years old: it was a suit by Balenciaga, dating from the early 1960s, and cost 50 pence. As an adult with a career within elite fashion media, his collections criteria include outfits selected and styled by leading fashion editors for *Vogue*.

Continuing his biographical trajectory of the practices of collecting into adulthood, Baudrillard writes that:

In later life, it is men over forty who most frequently fall victim to this passion. In short, there is in all cases a manifest connection between collecting and sexuality, and this activity appears to provide a powerful compensation during critical stages of sexual development. (Baudrillard 1994, 9)

Langley Moore relates how it was the gift of a Victorian gown that she had originally been lent to wear for a game of charades at Christmas 1928 that triggered her interest in collecting fashionable dress. Soon after, she purchased a lilac-colored silk damask gown in an antique shop in Harrogate, with the intention of refashioning it to make a garment for herself. At the last minute she withdrew her scissors: “I suddenly knew that I was about to do wrong, and, with extraordinary effects upon my whole subsequent life, desisted” (Langley Moore 1955, 10). She relates how she then started to actively seek “specimens” and build personal contacts in an era when there were no specialist auction rooms or dealers for historical fashion. Since

the 1980s the market demand for fashionable dress, particularly garments by famous designers, has grown significantly and the prices realized have increased dramatically. It is a period in which public museums have experienced significant cuts in funding and much of the demand comes from private collectors and private institutional buyers.

Kerry Taylor worked at Sotheby's (London, UK) before establishing her own, fashion-specific, auction house, Kerry Taylor Auctions, in 2003. She has done much to elevate the status and financial value of fashionable dress. With regard to her selling criteria, she states that "I want things that are either beautiful or extreme. I am not interested in representative everyday fashion. I want fashion that is fabulous quality, avant garde, interesting and important." She does not describe herself as a collector and states that she very occasionally buys something at auction to wear, but not to collect (about 35% of the buyers at her fine sales comprise the "buy-to-wear" market, and about 50% of her "Passion for Fashion" sales) (interview, December 7, 2015). During the course of her career she has learned much about fashion collectors and the desirability of certain objects and is widely respected for the rigorous research undertaken in the preparation of her catalogs. She says that the sale of a private collection always elicits excitement.

In 2006 Taylor sold Fulvia Lewis's lace collection following the collector's death. In the accompanying catalog she noted that "Her passion for lace began when she purchased a piece of Gros Point de Venise in a shop in Brighton in 1973. The complexity of its design, breath-taking quality and relatively inexpensive price meant she was hooked" (Taylor 2006, 7). Unlike Langley Moore, Lewis's initial acquisition was not made with a view to wearing although—as will be debated—it could be argued that it was Lewis's second, not first, lace specimen that was in fact collected.

Fashion collector, philanthropist and patron Jorge Yarrur Museo de la Moda, private museum open to the public, in Valencia, since 2007. He has become a major buyer at international auctions. He attributes his fashion collecting practices to inspiration he derived from his stylish mother, now owns some 16,000 items dating from the fifteenth century to the present day, of which approximately 60% comprises women's wear, 20% menswear and 20% children's clothing. He states that his acquisition policy focuses upon "history, design and technique," but recognizes that ultimately, as a private collector, "I collect what I like" (interview, September 5, 2017).

Whilst it is now recognized that curators working in public institutions cannot be entirely subjective in their collecting practices, the private collector is in a position to choose what to collect and how to classify it, where to keep it and when to handle or show it to others. Collecting can be an immensely social activity. Alasdair Peebles is a private collector of garments worn by boys and young men, dating from the 1730s to late 1950s. He reflects that "I feel like an outsider. I feel quite isolated as a collector, so I try and make connections ... to meet other collectors" (interview, December

7, 2015). Collecting can also provide a refuge and opportunity to impose order that can help counteract the uncertainties of everyday life. These are amongst the reasons that many autistic people, who have highly focused interests, become deeply attached to objects and enjoy collecting as an activity (National Autistic Society 2017).

Whatever point in life and for whatever reason a person becomes a collector, it is a practice that involves skills of identification and requires classification.

## Classification, Hierarchy and Fashions in Collecting

Classification precedes collection. (Elsner and Cardinal, 1994, 1)

Fashion is classified by private and institutional collectors into scores of categories with multiple subdivisions. Standard classifications, for private and institutional collectors, include garment type (coat) and style (trench coat); material (paper, fur, etc.); accessories (hats, shoes, handbags, etc.); and trimmings (buttons, lace, etc.). Others include period, or design themes such as Japonisme. The products of individual designers, brands, manufacturers and retail stores form other foci, as do items made and/or worn within specified with geographic locations. Some people collect dress associated with various life events and ceremonies such as christening, marriage, maternity or mourning, whilst others collect dress worn by one person. Gendered identity has traditionally been divided and classified by the male/female binary and E.J. Scott and Cicely Proctor argue (the latter in this special issue) that museum documentation systems should be implemented which permit the making of accurate records for objects associated with people who self-define as gender nonbinary, or transgender. Others collect dress for an imagined life, as revealed by Susan Bishop's paper in this special issue.

There are some fashion items that have commanded high prices and prestige for the owner. They often comprise objects that have been created in collaboration with a respected fine artist and can reveal superlative craft skills and/or are made from precious materials. Often small in scale, they mainly comprise fashion trimmings and accessories. Fans, especially those painted by artists, have commanded a status extended to few fashion objects. They have been collected by royalty including Queen Mary and aristocratic women such as Lady Charlotte Guest (later Schreiber), and have commanded the attention of men regarded as connoisseurs (such as Leonard Messel whose fan collection was donated to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, UK). Private collector Helene Alexander has made her world-famous fan collection accessible to the public at the Fan Museum (est. 1991) in Greenwich, London, UK.


Buttons for dress can be dated back to at least the thirteenth century and are widely collected. As they employ almost every material and making technique—and some are painted or crafted by artists—the financial value of a collection can vary tremendously. In 2015 the Les Arts Décoratifs (Paris, France) staged *Déboutonner la Mode* which exhibited the 3000-strong button collection, dating from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, including many decorated or made by fine artists and designers for top-level fashion clothing, compiled by specialist Loïc Allio. This outstanding collection has been classified as a Work of Major Heritage by the Consultative Commission on National Treasures.



Historically, immense prestige was also associated with collecting rare historical lace. Collectors included heads of state such as the Empress Eugénie (1826–1920), royalty including Queen Charlotte (1744–1818) and aristocrats such as the Baroness Edmond de Rothschild (1853–1935). Immensely wealthy women (for it was primarily women) such as Isabella Stewart Gardner followed suit. Some of these collections remained intact and were, at the collector's behest, shifted into the public domain. At the same time these women were collecting, the application of historical lace onto fashionable dress was the height of chic and, not least due to the high prices paid, was a widely recognized status symbol. Such was the demand for historical lace that scores of specialist dealers existed.

Worth was the most elite of international fashion designers, but socially he was classified as trade. In a bid for self-elevation, the haute couturier dressed in a smock and floppy beret that could be likened to the Dutch master artist Rembrandt (1606–1669) and presented himself as a gentleman connoisseur, displaying his collections of fine and decorative arts in his professional and personal spaces. It was a period when the prestige conferred on collectors of the fine and decorative arts was at its height. However, even in the 1950s Rheims observed: "To be a collector is to advance in the social scale at a great pace. Connoisseurship can be a closer and more intimate link than class" (1959/1961, 27). Today, when social status is less of an issue, collecting the fine and decorative arts can confer highly desirable cultural capital.

Belk states that "... collecting differs from other form of consumption in being relatively immune from fashion obsolescence" (1995, 66) but there clearly exists fashions within the field of collecting fashion. Kerry Taylor has noticed that:

In recent years collecting lace has become very unfashionable. Most buyers are from the USA or Japan, less so in Europe. It is a dying collecting field ... Collectors tend to be quite academic and there is often a gendered distinction. Men are much more interested in the technique and construction whereas women's interest is mainly aesthetic. (Interview, December 7, 2015)

She adds that  of her buyers “... won’t consider the nineteenth century, unless it is perhaps by Worth” (interview, December 7, 2015). Since the early twentieth century, the popularity of historical fashion and the work of certain designers are clearly entwined with prevailing fashions for retro styles.

When asked, in December 2015 what were the most highly desirable fashion items that she sold, Taylor was unequivocal that “Garments that have been worn by a celebrity  the holy relics of today ... they have left their DNA, it is all about the aura and people worshipping at the altar of fame ...” She gave as an example a 1964 suit designed by Chanel which might sell for £400–800; if worn by Chanel herself or by the Duchess of Windsor it might reach £4000–6000, and if Audrey Hepburn had worn it, it could reach  as much as £15,000–20,000 (interview, December 7, 2015). She states that buyers are always especially excited by the sale of a collection.

### The Point of No Return and Incompletion

One specimen does not make a collection, but only a month or so later, I happened to see another. (Langley Moore 1955, 10)

It is widely accepted that strategic selection lies at the heart of collecting, although it has already been argued that this is not necessarily the case with fashionable dress. Mieke Bal, cultural theorist with special interest in narratology and collecting, makes a strong case that the first item in what will become defined as a collection is not in fact collected. She writes that “Only retrospectively, through a narrative manipulation of the sequence of events, can the accidental acquisition of the first object *become* the beginning of a collection” (Bal 1994, 101; original emphasis). She continues, “The beginning, instead, is a meaning, not an act. Collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly become a meaningful sequence.” This certainly resonates with the practices of collecting fashion.

In his memoir *Looking Over My Shoulder* (1961), Dr Willett Cunnington relates how, in the 1930s, he became a collector of historical dress. It was the purchase an “old” silk dress for his wife Phillis, also a doctor, to refashion into an evening cloak. When he took it home the couple became intrigued by its provenance. He recalled, “Our medical instinct was agog to trace this particular epidemic to its origins” (Cunnington 1961, 130). They started to search for similar items, for comparative research purposes, and quickly became avid collectors. As Baudrillard notes, “And, just one object no longer suffices: the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects” (1994, 92).

Peebles states that “collecting is a vector of desire ... you construct your life around it ... constantly looking to acquire knowledge and objects ...

You are in a constant state of anticipation” (lecture, LCF, March 4, 1916). For a collector the act of selection can be thrilling and it can generate anxiety. Charles Stewart recalled a visit to his favorite dealer, a Mrs Gertrude Lee who had a stall on Portobello Road in London, UK. She had just acquired five trunks of clothes from a sale of property owned by Lady Robinson, wife of diamond millionaire Joseph Robinson. It included models by Worth and London court dressmaker Kate Reilly which had been packed away since the death of Lady Robinson in 1920. He noted that many other trunks had been burned;

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The agonies of choosing from such a dazzling array, and the conflict between the limitations of my purse and the knowledge that I would probably never have another chance to buy such beautiful things again, finally sent me away with several bulging suitcases and a splitting nervous headache having spent the unprecedented sum of £70. (Stewart 1980, 18)

However carefully sought and extravagant the most recent acquisition, Blom highlights that, for the collector, “Conquest is followed by disillusionment and the necessity for further conquests ... The most important object of a collection is the next one” (Blom 2003, 157). For Baudrillard:

What makes a collection transcend mere accumulation is not only the fact of its being culturally complex, but the fact of its incompleteness, the fact that it *lacks* something. Lack always means lack of something unequivocally defined: one needs such and such an absent object. (Baudrillard 1994, 23)

The implication is that a collection can never be considered as completed in the lifetime of the collector.

Occasionally a collector sells their collection in order to start collecting in a new field. In 1912 the Parisian haute couturier Jacques Doucet (1853–1929) sold his magnificent collection of eighteenth-century furniture in order to start collecting modern art. During the 1990s Peebles gradually sold his historical dress collection in order to focus his interests upon historical boy’s wear.

### Collecting the Self and Destruction

Here, indeed, lies the whole miracle of collecting. For it is inevitably *oneself* that one collects. (Baudrillard 1994, 12; original emphasis)

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Perhaps more than any other media, worn clothes can evidence lives lived and as a result they can serve as holders of deeply personal meanings. The dress belonging to a loved person is often retained as it can bear physical traces of the wearer's life, become imbued with their scent and/or have stretched to echo their body contours. In the absence of that person it can serve as a surrogate. Even when a relationship is professional, dress can generate intense feelings. Kerry Taylor is acutely aware that "Clothes are intimate and they are emotive. If I go to value a collection for probate, a lady's maid might become enraged that I am touching a dress, but handling paintings and jewellery does not elicit the same response" (interview, December 7, 2015). These are amongst the reasons that worn dress is given to a museum, where it will never be worn again and its provenance will be preserved. Alternatively, it can be purposively and even ceremoniously destroyed.

Collecting can become deeply entwined with our sense of self and with our sense of the past. From 1969 Cecil Beaton (1904–1980) collected elite fashion clothing from the world's top designers and most stylish women (very few menswear items were collected) for the exhibition *Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1971. In the accompanying catalog he related his desire to exhibit examples of the dress belonging to a Chicago fashion leader and her stylish mother, dating from the 1890s onward. Even though many items had never been unwrapped, her husband considered them to be of "... too private a nature. So he committed the great act of vandalism by burning the lot six weeks before I approached him" (Victoria & Albert Museum 1971, 8). Beaton rued, "So few people realize the historical importance of clothing. I didn't want to see works of art go down the drain. I wanted to possess them. I suppose if I'd been a woman, I would have worn them" (Clark and de la Haye 2014, 58).

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the collection is often described in terms of human anatomy, with references made to its heart, body and holes. The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin was a bibliophile and collector of children's toys. In his text "Unpacking my Library" he interpreted his acquisition of a new book as the rebirth of the object. He wrote that, for "... a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him: it is he who lives in them" (Benjamin 1931, 57). When a collection is interpreted as an extension of the self, it follows that it might also be attributed with a gendered identity.

## Gendered Identities and Collecting

Men seem to be more comfortable with, or more in need of, the hunt, and with the business of conquest and possession, with the loneliness



of this task and with submission to its demands, with social and intellectual hierarchies. (Blom 2003, 170)

Several writers referenced here (Rigby and Rigby, Belk, Pearce, Blom) believe there are distinctions in the predilections and practices of male and female collectors. Amongst the most provocative—and quoted here at length for this very reason and the fact that he mentions dress—is Frederick Baekeland's 1994 critique on the psychological aspects of art collecting in which he opines that:

The key to the relative paucity of women art collectors must therefore be not merely economic but also psychological. First, we should not forget that many women privately amass personal possessions far in excess of any practical need, without any thought of public exhibition other than adornment: we rarely think of accumulations of dresses, shoes, perfumes, china and the like as collections. They consist of relatively intimate and transient objects intended directly to enhance their owner's self-images, to be used until they are worn out or broken, and then discarded. Men's collections, however, be they of stamps, cars, guns or art, tend to have clear-cut thematic emphases and standard, external reference points in public or private collections. Thus women's collections tend to be personal and ahistorical, men's impersonal and historical, just as, traditionally, women have tended to have a greater emotional investment in people than in ideas and men to some extent the reverse. (Baekeland 1994, 207)

Not surprisingly, there has been a backlash amongst women academics. Charlotte Gere and Marina Vaizey's book *Great Women Collectors* (1999) is unusual, even almost 20 years on, in terms of its gendered focus. However, they—like many other writers—foreground immensely wealthy collectors of the fine and decorative arts, including the haute couturière Coco Chanel. Historian Dianne Sachko Macleod has a special interest in women's collecting practices and has sought to redefine collecting from a female perspective: "This teleological view of collecting as a premeditated process of selection, classification and categorization is the antithesis of the more intimate, subjective, and impromptu relationship that existed between women and things in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Macleod Sachko 2008, 6). She suggests that women have a deeper psychological attachment to the objects they collect; that they often collect to explore, express and perform themselves and that touch is core to women's attraction to certain objects. This female gendered interpretation might also be challenged. This author is not entirely convinced that women have a deeper psychological attachment to the objects they collect, nor that they collect to explore, express and perform themselves any more than those with other gendered entities.



Understandings of gender are not static. In the twenty-first century it is becoming increasingly accepted that gendered identities are more fluid than the male/female binary and that they are socially constructed. E.J. Scott's crowd-sourced—a new form of collecting—collection of objects, including garments, worn by transgender people is exceptional (it was exhibited at London College of Fashion in 2017 and has been touring to other venues). Some people, including Scott, are impelled to collect in order to form a record and legacy, where they identify a gap, oversight or perceive prejudice.

Eminent museologist Susan M. Pearce recognizes that the act of collecting is far from simple as:

... it involves both a view of inherited social ideas of the value which should (or should not) be attached to a particular object and which derive from the modern narratives ... and impulses which lie at the deepest level of individual personality. (Pearce 1994, 7)

However deeply entwined with the sense of self, sometimes—and often later in life—the responsibilities of owning a collection can become overwhelming and practical considerations take hold.

Dress—more than many other media—can prove especially awkward to care for and accommodate. As Langley Moore recognized, “For four very good reasons, private collections of costume are somewhat rare: they occupy a great deal of space, they need perpetual care, are liable to deteriorate in several disconcerting ways, and are difficult and expensive to display” (Langley Moore 1955, 9). Infestation is a major problem for dress collectors. These are amongst the reasons that fashion collections are shifted from the realm of the private collector to the public institution or sold at auction.

### Shifted and Dispersed, Bequests and Legacy

... the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter. (Benjamin 1931, 67)

Making plans for the future safekeeping of possessions often forms part of the preparation for death and this can include making gifts or bequests to museums. In 1903 Isabella Stewart Gardner founded a museum at Fenway Court in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, where she exhibited her magnificent collections of fine and decorative arts and historical textiles. At this time, contemporaneous fashions or those from the recent past were not exhibited within museums and she did not display the magnificent gowns she had worn. Instead, as was customary, she presented her fashionable dressed

appearance via painted portraits and—less conventionally—the use of a piece of pale green silk, which once formed part of a Worth gown, as the backdrop for hanging Titian's painting *The Rape of Europa* (1560–1562). Stewart Gardner bequeathed her museum to the American public along with an endowment which stipulated that her original gallery installations were to remain intact and that nothing would be added to or removed from her collections. Fenway Court was to remain exactly as she left it, as evidence of her creation and to form her legacy.

When a private collection is passed to a public museum, sometimes it retains its identity, remains intact and the collector is acknowledged. In 1947 the Cunningham collection—which mainly comprised nineteenth-century women's wear—was purchased by the City of Manchester, UK using public subscriptions. The same year the Gallery of English Costume was established to house it, whereupon it became the UK's first fashion focus on fashionable dress. However, more often, collections are integrated into existing systems of museum documentation and storage classifications, and are occasionally split between two or more institutions.

Walter Benjamin felt that the museum's imperative to create order could obfuscate the meanings invested in objects by their previous owners, that rationalism could replace personal knowledge and experiences. This appears to have been a concern shared by Anne, Countess of Rosse (1902–1992). In 1981, aged 79 years, she presented a large collection of fashionable dress, worn by her daughter, herself, her mother and grandmother, to Brighton Museum (UK). Once distanced from these items, she became concerned about any interventions the museum might make and wrote to the museum director to express these. In one letter she urged that the clothes should remain together and be interpreted within the context of her family: "My prime care is that they should be at Brighton and not passed around. I do feel that they are ... a collection. If most of them could be displayed as such" (Haye, Taylor, and Thompson 2005, 18). In another she wrote to say that she felt strongly that the museum did not undertake conservation work on the damaged dress that she had preserved as holders of her family memory. To support her case she wrote with much feeling that "All period dresses, if they have that meaning of being worn, if only once, become frail. Think what Mary Queen of Scots' be-heading dress would be like—it would have meaning." She continued: "Their frailty is in itself their magic, don't you think?" (Haye, Taylor, and Thompson 2005, 24–25). Lady Rosse's words express poetically the intense feelings that a dress collection can inspire.

Charles Stewart recalled that:

After devoting so much time, money, hard work and enthusiasm to forming my collection I was extremely concerned that it should not be dispersed when I died, and cast away again to the dangers and squalors from which so much of it had been rescued. The only solution which would ensure their lasting safety seemed to lie in giving them to a national museum.

In retirement, he spent much of his time identifying and labeling his collection, a process that became overwhelming and exhausting. The collection was also consuming his living spaces. In the late 1970s he donated it, along with Shambellie House (1855), built on land owned by his family since 1625, to the National Museum of Scotland. He describes how "... when it came to the final parting relief was mixed with regret. Almost immediately, as though a mission had been accomplished and I had no further concern in the matter, my interest in collecting costume mysteriously melted away" (Stewart 1980, 26). In 1982 it was opened as Scotland's National Museum of Costume.

In 2013 Shambellie House was closed in response to the financial depression and a visitor count of some 10,000 people per annum to see the dress collection. In email correspondence, Georgina Ripley, Curator, Modern & Contemporary Fashion & Textiles at National Museum of Scotland, advised that:

The whole collection has now been amalgamated into our permanent collection stored at our purpose-built Collection Centre in Granton. For the most part, we have tried to keep it together, i.e. the Charles Stewart hanging garments are kept together, but as the collection is so varied, encompassing fashion plates, accessories and other undergarments as well, we have stored like with like, thus largely integrating it into the main collection. However, it was catalogued in a different way originally (in hand-written registers) and as result most of the items have a Charles Stewart number as well as an accession number, and many of them still have original notes attached in Stewart's hand with information on the provenance, so it is in many ways still quite distinct. (Email, August 10, 2017)

When collections are sold at auction, the component parts become scattered. In many instances it is the auction catalog that provides the sole record of its existence, provenance and object specificities. Blom notes that "Without his catalogue every major collector has to fear the dispersal of his collection and his own descent into obscurity. A catalogue is not an appendage to a large collection, it is its apogee" (2003, 215). Christie's (Paris, France) sale catalog *Collection Personelle d' Elsa Schiaparelli* (January 2014) is, for example, a prime reference for which items of dress the haute couturière chose to wear from her own collections; the interior objects and artworks, including painted and photographic portraits, that she chose to live with. Occasionally a collection is safeguarded and acquired by an individual or institution. In 2012 Daphne Guinness bought Isabella Blow's (1958–2007) wardrobe. The two style mavericks had been friends since 1998 and were distantly related. Guinness explained that "I bought the collection because I couldn't bear for it to be dispersed; it was her life's work—her legacy" (Vogue.com, November 19, 2013).



These and so many other collections hold intriguing stories of one or multiple lives lived. Dispersed and integrated into the lives, and sometimes the collections, of new owners, the biography of these items of fashionable dress can lose their original context, but they can acquire extended biographies and further meanings.

## Conclusion

Like dressed appearance, collections announce something nonverbal to the world at large about the owner. They can serve as an extension of the self and form a creative form of self-expression. As Elsner and Cardinal recognize, "As one becomes conscious of one's self, one becomes a conscious collector of identity, projecting one's being onto the objects one chooses to live with ..." (1994, 3). Whilst collecting fashionable dress shares many traits with other collected media, it has been argued that distinctions can exist. Very often collections of fashion do not comprise strategically collected objects, one chosen in relation to the other. Rather, a group of already assembled clothing is interpreted as a collection. Also, many collectors do not see a conflict in wearing the dress that they define as collected. Susan Pearce writes that "Collections are a significant element in our attempt to construct the world, and so the effort to understand them is one way of exploring our relationship with the world" (1994, 37). Surely, there is no more eloquent or poignant a medium than dress, fashionable and otherwise, to facilitate precisely this.

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